



Castles by theowlandtheunicorn

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Summary: Steve has never been that good at fighting, but he's always been a pretty great babysitter. Takes place in 1977.

Castles

A/N: Fluff and not much else. You have been warned :)

Taking a sip of his orange juice, Steve Harrington leaned back in his beach chair and tried to remember all the boring things his eleven-year-old life consisted of.

He didn't have to think very hard. There were things such as math class. Going to sleep. Take Your Child to Work Day. Doing the dishes. Carol talking about makeup. But try as he might, he couldn't think of a single thing that was more boring than a family vacation.

He placed the orange juice at the little white table and looked around. His mom was sprawled across her chair, her hat and sunglasses on, reading a boring-looking book and pausing occasionally to put on more sunscreen. His father's chair was empty, because he was getting up every other hour and running to the hotel to answer a phone call. Steve sighed.

He would never have admitted it, but he'd gladly have traded this vacation for two more weeks of middle school. Unlike school, this place didn't have a basketball court, there was no one to play with anyway, it was more boring than Mr. Miller's math class could ever hope to become and it was too hot to be allowed when you had all this hair falling over your face and neck.

Steve pushed a strand away from his forehead and huffed. His dad had been going at him to get a haircut for months, doubly so since the vacation neared, but Steve had dug in his heels. All of his dad's best-argued reasoning about looking ridiculous and being too hot fell on deaf ears.

Because one afternoon, right before Tommy's eleventh birthday party, Steve had discovered The Secret.

Not that anyone could have guessed it, looking at him now. It was more difficult to get away with stealing his mom's hairspray in the hotel room than in the huge house back in Hawkins, so at the

moment, the hair did indeed feel like a bit too much. Steve wiped the sweat from his forehead and tried to slick the hair back for the hundredth time, knowing that he did, in fact, look ridiculous.

Not that he cared too much. For better or for worse, no one from Hawkins was around to see him, and all the other children at the beach only had eyes for their siblings and friends.

Steve leaned back in his chair again, wishing he had someone to play with. He wished, not for the first time, that he had a brother or a sister, someone who'd be forced to go on these boring trips too and who'd have no better option than to play with him. At least, he wished Tommy was there. He'd have given all of his pocket money for even *Carol*, and that was saying something. (Not that he'd ever say it to her.)

As he stared at the children screaming with delight as they ran through the water, splashing each other and generally enjoying themselves, his eyes fell on a small boy sitting in the sand. He was chubby in that babyish sort of way, with a curly mess of sand-filled hair which made Steve feel a bit better about the state of his own hair. He also seemed completely oblivious to the noise around him, because he was making the biggest, most beautiful sandcastle Steve had ever seen. It had a moat, walls, stairs, towers, and even something that looked like a bridge. Various colorful tools of the trade were scattered in the sand around him, and Steve stared in awe as the kid added another tower to the foundation.

He sat up in his chair, almost ready to go over, but there was a problem. He couldn't just come up and start making a castle too, because he didn't know how to, and he was eleven years old. He couldn't just come up to a kid half his age and ask if he could play with him.

He was mulling this over in his head when another, slightly older kid approached. Steve watched closely to see if the little boy would accept an additional builder, but the older kid didn't seem to be asking that. He pointed at the castle, laughed and kicked at it. The entire left side crumbled. The little boy began to cry.

Steve's eyes widened. He marched towards them.

"Hey, if you're not gonna play nice, why don't you just leave him alone?"

The kid looked up and sneered.

"Or what?"

"Or, or I'll –"

He was saved from coming up with an end to that sentence, because the kid lowered his head and ran forward. Too surprised to move, Steve got the wind knocked out of him and fell down on his butt. The kid started laughing, then, with a sudden terrified expression, ran away.

Steve sat in the sand, his mouth hanging open and his ribcage sore in the shape of a large head, breathing heavily.

Did that freaking kid just –

– *headbutt him?*

He rubbed at his ribs and glanced around. Everyone was looking at him. His eyes had almost filled with tears out of pure shock and humiliation, when –

"Are you okay, sweetie?"

A blond woman scooping up the crying child observed him with worried eyes.

"That little hooligan," a large bearded man was grumbling. "If I ever find out who his parents are –"

"What's your name, honey?" the woman asked.

"Steven, ma'am," Steve said, getting up.

She gave a wide smile. "It's nice to meet you, Steven! This is Dusty," she said, stroking the child's hair. "Look, Dusty, this is your new friend Steven!"

A teary blue eye peeked from his mother's neck and met his. Steve waved. The boy turned shyly away again.

"Thank you so much for doing that for him," the woman murmured.

"You're a fine young man, son," the man said.

"Thank you, sir," Steve said, cautiously proud of himself, and also quite confused. Had these people missed the part where he got pushed into the sand? Because they couldn't have been praising him had they seen that. Not even grown-ups were that weird.

"Are you from around here, Steven?" the woman asked.

"No, I'm from Indiana."

"Oh, I've always loved Indiana," she said as she put her child down again, speaking soft words into his ear. The boy had stopped crying, and was now gazing at the ruined castle with a heartbroken look in his eyes.

Steve approached him.

"You need help fixing that?" he asked gently. He had no idea how to build sandcastles, let alone how to fix one, but he was older and taller and had bigger hands, he thought, and that would probably deem him appropriately experienced in the kid's eyes.

However, not even daring to look up, the kid shook his head.

It didn't seem like a harsh refusal, more like a timid statement of fact, and Steve knew the kid didn't need his help, not really. But his heart dropped a little all the same.

"Oh. Yeah, okay." He glanced at the kid's parents who were both smiling at them both, exuding that kind of unrestrained warmth that just seemed to come naturally to some families.

"Well... bye then," he said.

He made his way back to his chair and plopped down on it.

His mom was snoring softly, one arm hanging from the side of her chair, the book half open on her stomach.

His dad still wasn't there.

Steve leaned back and looked upwards, at the bright colors of the open umbrella.

September first couldn't come fast enough.

Just as he was wondering if he could force himself into a nap to make the time pass quicker, there was a creak from the direction of his father's chair. He turned around to find the little boy's mom.

She smiled at him, glancing at his mother.

"Dusty's dad and I need to run to the hotel real quick," she whispered, "and I was wondering if you would keep an eye on Dusty for a bit. He's a sweet and well-mannered boy, he won't be any trouble."

"Yeah, sure," Steve says, nodding seriously and getting up. "Okay."

He jumped from his chair and all but ran to the kid, whose castle was already looking much better than before.

"Hi. Your mom said I should watch you," he said.

"Yeah, she told me," the kid said quietly.

Steve sat cross-legged in front of the castle.

"You sure you don't want any help?" he asked.

Dusty nodded. Then, after a few moments, he looked up. Squinting in the sun, he seemed to be thinking about something very carefully. Steve arranged his face into his best reliable, benevolent and hard-working expression.

Finally, the boy's face softened, and he pointed to a blue plastic bucket. "Fill that with sand," he said.

Steve grinned and did as he was told.

This was okay, he thought, as he stuffed fistfuls of scratchy sand into the bucket. He wasn't playing with a kid half his age. He was babysitting.

Sitting on the edge of a chair half hidden behind a bush, Claudia had her eyes fixed on the two children playing in the sand. She'd never have left her son alone, especially with bullies running around, but she just couldn't pass up the opportunity to matchmake a friendship between her tiny precocious son and the adorable boy who had stood up for him, and who was so well spoken, and who looked so very lonely.

Richard Henderson walked down from the hotel, camera in hand, and approached his wife. She beckoned at him to hurry up.

"Just look at them," she gushed. "Dusty's made a friend! Give me that camera."

Richard chuckled, placed a hand on his wife's shoulder and looked fondly at the scene in question. "They're hardly friends, Claudy, the kid's twice his age."

"Oh, what do you know. Look at them and tell me they're not – awwww, he's helping Dusty build the castle!"

"You're doing that wrong," Dusty said, as Steve poured more water into his bucket.

"Yeah? What's wrong?"

"You put too much water and now it's too mushy. You only need a little. But it's okay, we'll do it again." He took the bucket, spilled all the mud and started filling it with fresh dry sand. When it was about half full, he gave it back. "Now add water, but be very very careful."

Under close supervision, Steve poured a tiny amount of water from the water bucket, mixed it all up, and upended the bucket onto the foundation. A perfect tower bloomed.

The kid gave him a wide, toothy grin.

"See? It's not that hard."

"Yeah, thanks," Steve said, feeling irrationally happy. He reached for the little plastic shovel, and his eyes fell on a small bucket was filled with rocks.

"What are all these rocks for?" he asked.

"Just some treasure I found," the boy said. He took the bucket and emptied it on the sand, then picked out an oval pebble.

"See this?" he said, with all the air of a young archeologist at his first dig. "This is a dinosaur egg."

"Yeah?" Steve said, holding back a laugh. "How come it's so small?"

"Because it's a *hundred years old*."

"Oh."

Steve picked out another stone, dark and round with a light hairline crack across the middle.

"What's this?"

"That one's from Ancient Egypt," the kid said. "It looks like a rock, but it's actually a very old bug who's asleep. You need to leave it out in the sun for three days if you want it to wake up, but you need to be careful and only choose days when it's *really really* sunny, because if it doesn't get enough sunlight, it can turn into a *monster*."

"Ooh, got it. Thanks for the warning." Steve returned the bug-rock into the pile and held up a pretty blue-tinted pebble. "How about this one?"

"That one's from the lost city of Atlantis. It's a *very rare* special magic stone. Atlantisians used it to travel through time."

"Really?" Steve said, trying his best to sound sufficiently impressed. "That's super cool."

"You can have it," Dusty said with a smile, pleased at the reaction. "I already have twenty-three."

"Wow. Thanks!"

Grinning, Steve put the pebble into his pocket.

As the kid began explaining the origin of the rest of his treasure, Steve glanced in the direction of his parents' chairs.

Both of them were there, and Dusty's parents were talking to them. Suddenly, all four of them looked at Steve and smiled.

He smiled back.

He looked at the kid jabbering on about the rocks, and took great care to sound excited and impressed at everything he heard. Really, Dusty's mom was right, he was such a great kid, and Steve realized he wanted to do something for him. He reached into his pocket where he still had that bit of money his mom had given him.

"Hey, you like ice cream, right?"

If it was possible, Dusty's eyes lit up even more. "Yeah!"

"Come on, let's go get some."

As they stood up, Dusty grabbed Steve's hand and together they walked to the ice cream cart. None of the people around were looking at them, but Steve felt like everyone was looking at them, and thinking what a great big brother/cousin/babysitter he was. He raised his head, straightened up, and paid for two chocolate ice creams.

"They're – oh, Dusty is *actually* – Steven is taking him for ice cream! And Dusty is going with him!" She turned to her husband with a pleading look on her face. "Can we adopt him?"

Richard Henderson, whose wife had asked him that question many times over the course of their marriage, albeit for different species, didn't look up from his newspaper, and slowly shook his head.

Claudia made a soft noise of complaint and turned her attention back to the scene. Her little son, who was so frail and who'd always been so scared of everything, who barely went to another room if his mom

wasn't there, was holding an older boy's hand and accepting an ice cream from him.

"They're just so sweet," she said quietly, and wiped her eyes.

In the end, they'd fixed the first castle and made another one from scratch, and Steve got that sense of accomplishment he sometimes had when he studied enough to get a really good grade, only this was ten times better. Because a grade was a letter on a piece of paper, and this was an actual freaking *castle*.

He'd also talked to Dusty's mom about Indiana like a grown-up, and Dusty's dad had bought them all more ice cream, and Dusty had hugged him when they were leaving, and Steve had ruffled his curls and thought they were the cutest after all, on a baby, that is. It was the best day ever. The only thing that made him a little sad was the fact that the Hendersons were going home tomorrow, but he tried not to let it show. He was eleven after all.

That evening, back in the hotel room with his parents, he took the blue-tinted pebble out of his pocket and ran his fingers over it. It was warm and smooth, and felt flat and good in the palm of his hand. He smiled. What was it again, a time-traveling stone? He'd have to remember that, he thought. Just on the off-chance it turned out to be true.

"Throw that away, Steve," his dad said. "You're too old to be collecting pebbles."

Steve rolled his eyes. "I *know*, dad. I wasn't gonna keep it. Sheesh."

His dad smiled that knowing smile, the way that grown-ups did when they thought they could read their children's minds and that plainly said he didn't believe him at all. Steve rolled his eyes again, gave a huge, theatrical sigh, and then, when no one was looking, snuck the stone into his backpack.

Later, when his dad asked him if he threw it away, Steve was just about to lie as his mom stepped in.

"He did," she said, smiling wryly, "right out the window. I hope you

were careful, Steve, I don't want any angry guests knocking down our door."

Frowning, Steve looked at his mom.

She winked.

"Yeah, don't worry, mom," he said, grinning. "I was super careful."

A/N: Thank you for reading! Characterization for pretty much all of them was a bit of a challenge here, but I hope it turned out okay. I'd love to hear what you think!